

A decorative graphic featuring three concentric blue circles of varying sizes. Two circles are in the upper right quadrant, and one is in the lower right quadrant. Thin blue lines intersect the circles and extend across the page.

EDUCATION FOR THE 1980's: QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A Speech by The Honorable Norman Lacy, MP,
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to a Conference of Officers of the Special Services Division
of the Education Department of Victoria.

Concepts such as quality, accountability, and rights have not had much currency over the past 10 years in education debate. This speech, by one of the Ministers responsible for the most significant restructuring of administration of a major State Government department, asks “Why not?” and “Why concepts such as equality, quantity and needs” have dominated the debate?

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Thank you for your invitation to address this important conference today.

I speak to you today not as an expert – as I guess, most of you are in one specialty or another, not even as a professional in the education sector, but as a parent of a child in a state primary school and of two others that have been students in the state system. I also speak as someone who has had an interest in education issues for more than 15 years and who has had the opportunity to develop my ideas for education reform over the past five years in policy discussions with the former Minister of Education the Hon. Lindsay Thompson as the Chairman of his *Education Policy Committee*. I also had the opportunity in 1977 while attending the *Advanced Management Program* at the *Australian Administrative Staff College* at Mt Eliza as a nominee of the *Parliament of Victoria* to test my ideas for the management of a State Education system on a syndicate group of 10 senior executives of the major Australian corporations. Apart from that, I suppose my academic and professional background is well known except perhaps for the fact that I left Richmond Technical School, initially at the age of 15 years, to commence my first career as a plumber's apprentice. So I suppose I did learn something about the State public school system from that.



There is a fundamental reason why concepts such as quality and accountability, and rights have not had much currency over the past 10 years in education debate. It is that other concepts such as equality, quantity and needs have dominated the debate.

For example, when faced with the evidence of the Australia-wide *Australian Council on Educational Research* survey - literacy and numeracy that between 4% and 15% of primary students are in danger of leaving school functionally illiterate, the Australian Teachers' Federation responds by not disputing the results, but claiming that the problem can only be met by providing greater resources to schools.

That is, "more of the same" in the form of lower teacher/pupil ratios, smaller class sizes, more and better equipment and hardware, bigger class floor areas, better classroom furniture, more book stock in school libraries, bigger and better reading systems, more specialist teachers and para-educational professionals.

The "more of the same" policy of the teacher associations is the other side of the "quantity" syndrome the *Education Department* has had for the past 20 years.

Both are responses to the long standing debate on "equality of educational opportunity". Another reflection of the same thing is the so called "needs" of the *Australian Schools Commission* and other organisations.

The line of argument that the "needs" policy is based on goes like this:

All children are entitled to equal opportunities to get on in life.

- to develop to their maximum potential.
- to pursue whatever career they choose.
- to reap the rewards of their efforts.

No-one can complain about that.

But the next step in the argument is that because educational qualifications are related to the financial rewards of careers, education determines whether or not a child is able to achieve his, or his parents', aspirations. But universal education does not guarantee equal education opportunities. To have equal education opportunities you must have schools with equal resources in terms of teachers, specialists, equipment and classrooms.

If a particular school does not have an equal amount of these resources to all other schools it has a "need", i.e. a need for more until it does have equal.

Of course if a school has a need it is a disadvantaged or an underprivileged school and all the children who attend that school are similarly disadvantaged and underprivileged.

Now the final step in the argument - which is conveniently never stated or else the most poorly educated parent would recognise the blatant fallacy of the whole argument - is that once we have managed to get all the schools up to minimum levels of physical resources then all the children attending all the schools will have equal schooling and therefore equal educational opportunities and therefore will come out of the education system equal.

The great debate in education in the 1970's has been one of equality of educational opportunity for all children. Now, as we are approaching the 1980's we are at last beginning to ask: What does education opportunity for all mean?

The Australian concept of equal educational opportunity appears to have been interpreted as equal and uniform provision of resources throughout the schools of each State. This concept has resulted in a large scale program of increased expenditure, staffing, buildings, equipment and other school resources. Such a policy has now been applied for more than 10 years without any apparent reduction in the proportion of illiterate exit pupils from our school system.

An explanation could well be that the solution is inappropriate to the problem. Instead of focusing on those who the present school system is failing, it focuses on the whole school community. It provides additional resources for all, including those who do not need additional resources to become basically literate, such as literate students and literate teachers; and for subjects in which the children at risk may be experiencing no difficulties such as art, music, physical education, or to which they have no access, such as library.

We must now look very carefully at education in terms other than in-puts. We must begin to look more carefully and effectively at out-puts of education. In the past 10 years educationists have

generated much innovation and experimentation which has not been sufficiently concerned with educational out-puts.

I see that innovation and experimentation as having been conducted at two levels - tinkering and enquiring. Tinkering can be distinguished by the absence of any carefully thought-out theories. This approach appears to assume that if we are dissatisfied with what we are doing, then we should try anything else that sounds plausible. This approach, of course, does not require any significant change in attitude, insight or administration. Rather, this requires an impressive array of alternatives of gadgetry, program descriptions, and teaching arrangements and so on. Experimentation conducted at the enquiring level at least aims to tell us something useful. In line with this approach are the very good efforts one can find occurring in our schools which do question the 'why' of education rather than just the 'how', and do prove that effective use can be made of new technology and new teaching approaches in producing curriculum for children with special needs.

However, educators must be prepared to accept, and respond to, certain demands by others involved in the education of children. Obviously, those "others" are individual parents and the community at large. No longer can the mere activities of educators be the justification for their existence.

More and more parents want to have a say in what happens to their children within the education system. Some States of America have in fact legislated that parents have access to information on the learning progress of their children.

It now goes unchallenged that approximately 15% of children leave primary school unable to read sufficiently well to meet the absolute minimum requirements necessary for living in a modern society. I do understand that not all children should be expected to learn to read independently before they leave primary school, and that the process of learning to read should not stop at the end of primary school.

However, I am sure that the numbers could be much less than the current figure of about 60,000 children who we know will not learn to read by the end of their primary schooling. It appears that there are certain fundamental facts that educators must face if we are to enter the 1980 with any degree of confidence.

FACT 1: Education is not schooling, and schooling is not teaching.

Certainly teaching is a part of schooling, but not its whole; just as schooling is part of education, but far from its whole. In their education and in their learning, children draw on many sources other than the school or the teacher. By far the greatest source is a child's immediate family, then comes the local social environment. To the age of 5 years, the family is all most children have. Even when of school age a child spends more time out of school than in it. That time not in school is once again spent at home or in the local environment. Parents and the local environment must then be recognised by educators as active partners in the education process.

FACT 2: The contribution of the school can be measured.

There are some things we know about our school system. For example:

- We know that approximately 625,000 students attend Victorian public schools.
- We know that there were 52,681 teachers employed as at March this year.
- We know that the total Victorian expenditure on education for 1978-79 will be about \$1,280 million.
- We know the age distribution of children in our primary schools.

However, we do not know how many of those children have a reading age commensurate with their chronological age. Thus, we do not know how many of those children need specialised assistance in the acquisition of literacy.

In general terms it costs about \$1,000 per year to educate a child in the State school system. (Interestingly, it is on average dearer than on the independent system.)

Since most children have 12 or more years of schooling, that makes the cost of the final product the exit secondary school student - \$12,000 (about equal to the cost of a Holden Commodore, exclusive of registration, third party, sales tax, and other on the road costs).

It is worth comparing the sort of information that the consumer of the Commodore would want about his product, with the sort of information the consumer of 12 years of formal schooling wants about the student who is compulsorily the product of our education system. When you are in the market for a new car and you go looking for information, all your questions relate to the vehicle and the quality of its performance. You don't ask questions about the plant that produced the vehicle.

Can you imagine the look on the face of the salesman at *Bill Patterson Motors*, if you sided up to him while looking over a new Commodore and asked:

- What is the ratio of assembly line operators per vehicles produced annually at G.M.H.? or
- What is the floor area of the spray paint unit in square metres? or
- How many years experience have the turners and fitters at G.M.H. had?
- But if you asked him:
- How many miles per litre the Commodore got on a country run? or
- How many revs per minute it generated at 100 K.P.H.? or
- the acceleration speed in 1st gear?

He wouldn't even have to consult the manual. This prompts a couple of questions:

1. Why can't we have a method of collecting information on the quality of what our schools are doing to our children?
2. Why do we keep having statistics about quantity pushed at us?

These are not easy questions to answer. Lest it should be thought that it has not been done because it is not possible, let me say at the outset that it can be done.

In 1974, the *Australian Council on Educational Research* produced and tested a series of basic tests on literacy and numeracy. There is a clue as to why it has not been done in the *House of Representatives Select Committee on Specific Learning Difficulties*, P.23

"The Committee reached the following conclusions: Surveys should assist in the formulation of policy. Because of its sensitivity to the resistance of education authorities to any survey comparing educational outcomes between schools and systems, the Australian Council on Educational Research did not devise its tests to compare such outcomes. The Committee believes these outcomes should be measured and compared, and resistance is indefensible."

If something schools are doing is going to be evaluated, then the result may prove negative.

My answer is that it has not been done because it has not been required, by parents or by Governments. It was not required because there was no direct relationship between the client and the professional in the education system. For only when there is a direct relationship is there any direct accountability.

If I buy a Commodore I buy it through an agency which has a franchise provided by the producer - G.M.H. The product comes with performance guarantees which, if not fulfilled, ensure that I can get the car fixed. If the employee at G.M.H. responsible for fitting and testing the carburetor fails to fit it or test it, and fails to report that to the Manager; and if 20 consumers who have purchased their cars come back to their agents complaining that they are faulty or don't meet minimum performance criteria; then the agency has a real problem. The agency will send the cars back to the company and the Manager will test them, find the fault, and be able to trace the responsibility back to a particular employee. If it is a result of laziness or carelessness, he will be looking for another job. He is accountable.

There is no such accountability in the State education system. Many parents and teachers would argue that such a direct form of accountability is inappropriate to the education enterprise. I am inclined to agree with them. However, parents should know the expected outcomes of schooling. Parents should know how their child has performed absolutely and relatively, in terms of the grades mean score. Similarly the parent should have access to the mean score of his child's grade, again both absolutely and maybe relative to other grades at that level in that school.

Finally, he should perhaps have information on his child's school's mean score and those of the other schools in the district. I agree that assessment is easiest in the cognitive domain, and that development in the social and personal domains must not be overlooked or underestimated. However, the argument that since we can measure only one domain, to do so would distort the purpose of schooling and therefore no assessment program should be countenanced is a counsel of nihilism and despair.

FACT 3: Schools do make a difference.

I am challenging (and challenging as toughly as I can) the current belief that schools cannot, without further enormous resources, do much to combat educational failure. The belief that schools are

powerless to change the inexorable "progress" of a child towards failure is simply wrong.

What happens in schools is an important determinant of the type of child that emerges at the end of the process. Any other belief must have wholly adverse consequences for the teaching profession and for the children in our schools. Recent research shows that a child's intellectual performance can be improved by the school they go to, and that one of the critical elements involved in this argument is the quality of the school's performance.

FACT 4: Teaching styles do make a difference.

Evidence available confirms that various teaching styles additionally affect the intellectual and emotional growth of pupils. Stated simply, the facts are:

1. The more formal the teaching, the more time pupils spend working on a subject.
2. In general, the more time pupils spend working on a subject, the more they improve at it (this is hardly surprising)
3. Students in formal classrooms improve considerably more in reading and mathematics. In fact, it can now be stated that informal teaching seems to have hindered the transmission of literacy and numeracy. I must emphasise, however, that by formal teaching I do not mean authoritarian teaching. I am sure you, as professionals, know the difference.

I have purposefully emphasised literacy, and to some extent numeracy. I believe it is towards these essential skills that we must redirect our attention in the eighties. This is not to denigrate other curriculum areas. On the contrary, a balanced education directed towards a quality of life is important. I argue that individual schools must retain a degree of autonomy in striking this balance. But we must not lose sight of the fact that numeracy and literacy are common needs across all communities.

If we can enter the eighties with positive, co-operative attitudes towards this task then I see no reason why a much higher level of achievement cannot become a reality for many more children.